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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ROME 000699

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2013

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [IT](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITALIAN](#) [POLITICS](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#)

SUBJECT: ITALY: BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT RIDING TOUGH DOMESTIC
WAVE ON IRAQ

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 ROME 00699 01 OF 04 202219Z

REF: A. ROME 0443

[1](#)B. ROME 6167

CLASSIFIED BY: A/POLITICAL-MINISTER COUNSELOR GARY ROBBINS
FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) ITALY HAS MADE ITS STRATEGIC CHOICE ON IRAQ. THE GOI WILL BACK FORCIBLE DISARMAMENT OF SADDAM, WITH OR WITHOUT A UN RESOLUTION, IF IT BECOMES NECESSARY. HOW IT GETS TO THAT DECISION POINT WILL BE MESSY, IN LARGE PART BECAUSE PM BERLUSCONI IS CONFRONTING A MOSTLY UNFAVORABLE POLITICAL SITUATION ON THE HOME FRONT. THE ITALIAN PUBLIC OVERWHELMINGLY OPPOSES MILITARY ACTION AGAINST IRAQ; THE VATICAN CONTINUES TO PRESS THE "PEACE" TRACK; AND THE CENTER-LEFT OPPOSITION REFUSES TO CLIMB ON BOARD A BIPARTISAN BANDWAGON. STRIP AWAY ITALY'S SECULAR FACE, AND A COUNTRY THAT IS STILL HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY "CULTURAL CATHOLICISM" SURFACES. IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, THIS TRANSLATES INTO DEEP SKEPTICISM TOWARD MILITARY ACTION, IF NOT OUTRIGHT PACIFISM. IT MAKES THE GOI'S PUBLIC "BURDEN OF PROOF" FOR WHY ITALY MAY NEED TO SUPPORT ARMED INTERVENTION IN IRAQ VERY HIGH.

[1](#)2. (C) THE GOI HAS SETTLED ON A WORKABLE PARLIAMENTARY STRATEGY THAT RESULTED IN OVERWHELMING COALITION SUPPORT FOR ITS FEBRUARY 19 MOTION ON IRAQ (SEPTTEL): EMPHASIZE PEACE, PREPARE FOR CONFLICT, AND CONSULT REGULARLY WITH PARLIAMENT. THE CENTER-LEFT, EAGER TO RIDE THE TIGER OF PUBLIC OPINION,
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 ROME 00699 01 OF 04 202219Z
HAS SPURNED THE GOI'S EFFORTS TO TURN IRAQ POLICY INTO A BIPARTISAN ISSUE. FOR THIS REASON, DENYING THE OPPOSITION THE OPPORTUNITY TO PAINT THE GOI AS ISOLATED IN EUROPE WAS, FOR BERLUSCONI, A KEY OUTCOME OF THE FEBRUARY 17 EU SUMMIT AND MAY HELP SOME IN MANAGING PUBLIC OPINION. IN PUBLIC, THE PM WILL CONTINUE TO STRESS THAT ITALY IS WORKING FOR PEACE, PARTICULARLY FOLLOWING A MAJOR ANTI-WAR DEMONSTRATION IN ROME. AT THE SAME TIME, HOWEVER, IT IS MAKING THE CASE MORE OPENLY THAT TIME IS RUNNING OUT FOR SADDAM TO COOPERATE WITH THE UN INSPECTIONS. IF PRESIDENT BUSH DECIDES TO ATTACK IRAQ, THE GOI WILL LINE UP A DIVIDED COUNTRY BEHIND A U.S.-LED MILITARY COALITION. WE BELIEVE THE BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT IS SOLID ENOUGH INTERNALLY, AND STILL ENJOYS SUFFICIENTLY BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT TO STAY THE COURSE. END SUMMARY.

A FAITHFUL ALLY

[1](#)3. (C) THE GOI HAS ARRIVED AT THE IRAQ ENDGAME FULLY COMMITTED TO SOLIDIFYING ITALY'S POLITICAL AND SECURITY PARTNERSHIP WITH THE U.S. IT HAS MADE A STRATEGIC CHOICE IN BACKING OUR FUNDAMENTAL GOAL OF DISARMING SADDAM. PM BERLUSCONI'S SIGNATURE ON THE WALL STREET JOURNAL "LETTER OF THE EIGHT" PROVED A WILLINGNESS TO TAKE SIDES IN PUBLIC, AT SOME POLITICAL RISK. THE GOI'S RECENT GRANTING OF ROAD, RAIL, AND PORT ACCESS FOR MOVEMENT OF U.S. TROOPS AND EQUIPMENT THROUGH ITALIAN NATIONAL TERRITORY MOVES ITALY FURTHER INTO THE CAMP OF THOSE COUNTRIES OFFERING NOT ONLY POLITICAL, BUT ALSO CONCRETE SUPPORT. ITALY IS AND WILL REMAIN A FAITHFUL ALLY -- WILLING TO MAKE THE TOUGH CALLS
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 ROME 00699 01 OF 04 202219Z
WHEN NECESSARY. NEVERTHELESS, BERLUSCONI IS MANAGING A DELICATE DOMESTIC SITUATION THAT IMPACTS HOW THE GOVERNMENT HAS FRAMED THE IRAQ ISSUE AND THE TACTICS THE GOI HAS ADOPTED TO SUPPORT ITS POLICY.

TOUGH DOMESTIC SLEDDING

[1](#)4. (C) ITALY'S IRAQ POLICY IS BEING GENERATED UNDER MOSTLY UNFAVORABLE POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES: STRONG ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT, THE PERSISTENT INFLUENCE NOT SIMPLY OF THE VATICAN BUT CATHOLIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY MORE BROADLY, AND AN OPPOSITION DETERMINED TO SEEK POLITICAL ADVANTAGE AND THUS

UNWILLING TO BROOK ANY COMPROMISE OVER AN ISSUE IT HAS CAST AS PEACE VERSUS WAR. NEW POLLS RELEASED LAST WEEK REVEAL A YAWNING GAP BETWEEN THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF ITALIANS WHO BELIEVE BOTH THAT IRAQ HAS TIES TO AL-QAIDA AND RETAINS WMD CAPABILITY, BUT YET REJECT THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE OUT OF HAND, AND THE MINORITY WILLING TO COUNTENANCE WAR AS A MEANS TO ADDRESS THE THREAT. SEVENTY PERCENT OF THE PUBLIC IS NOW OPPOSED TO ATTACKING IRAQ.

15. (C) THE VATICAN'S INFLUENCE IS INDIRECT AND DIFFUSE; THE POPE IS NOT PULLING ANY STRINGS AT THE PM'S OFFICE OR THE

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CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL PTQ2279

PAGE 01 ROME 00699 02 OF 04 202220Z
ACTION EUR-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AF-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DOEE-00	WHA-00
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	VCE-00	AC-01	NEA-00	NRRC-00	NSAE-00	OES-00	OIC-02
	OMB-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00
	IRM-00	SSO-00	SS-00	SVC-00	TRSE-00	T-00	USIE-00
	SA-00	SSD-00	PMB-00	DRL-01	G-00	SSR-00	SAS-00

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P 201733Z FEB 03
FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8354
INFO NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY
AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY
AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY
USCINCENT MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 04 ROME 000699

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2013

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [IT](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITALIAN](#) [POLITICS](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#)
SUBJECT: ITALY: BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT RIDING TOUGH DOMESTIC
WAVE ON IRAQ

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 ROME 00699 02 OF 04 202220Z
MFA. HOWEVER, AS LONG AS THE HOLY SEE CONTINUES TO CLAIM "THERE ARE STILL AVENUES OF PEACE TO EXPLORE," IT IS DIFFICULT FOR THE GOI TO ARGUE OTHERWISE. MOREOVER, ITALY, DESPITE A DECADES-LONG TREND OF SECULARIZATION, REMAINS A COUNTRY THAT IS "CULTURALLY CATHOLIC" AND ITS POLITICAL CLASS--ESPECIALLY ON THE CENTER-RIGHT--REFLECTS THIS SOCIAL REALITY. THE UPSHOT IS A PERVERSIVE AND VISCERAL ANXIETY ABOUT MILITARY CONFLICT THAT, WITHIN THE GOVERNING COALITION, EXTENDS BEYOND THE TINY CENTRIST UNION OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS (UDC).

16. (C) INDEED, A STRONG CATHOLIC STREAK RUNS THROUGHOUT THE GOVERNING COALITION; OLD LINE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN FORZA ITALIA AND ARE ACTIVE IN THE RIGHT-WING NATIONAL ALLIANCE. WHILE THESE PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS ARE NOT DETERMINANT IN SHAPING THE FOREIGN POLICY DEBATE, THEY WIELD CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE. MOREOVER, A GOVERNING COALITION THAT REACHED OUT TO CATHOLIC VOTERS AS A KEY CONSTITUENCY CANNOT AFFORD TO USE BELLICOSE RHETORIC TO EXPLAIN POLICY CHOICES. THEREFORE, THE RHETORICAL TONE IS MUTED, STRATEGY IS CAST IN TERMS OF MAINTAINING THE FOCUS ON PEACE, AND PUBLIC ENCOURAGEMENT IS GIVEN TO DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES REGARDLESS OF THEIR CHANCES OF SUCCESS (REF A). WHILE PREPARING FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF CONFLICT, THE GOI IS TRYING TO INSULATE ITSELF FROM ACCUSATIONS THAT IT IS PRO-WAR.

17. (C) THE CENTER-LEFT OPPOSITION'S DISJOINTED APPROACH TO IRAQ IS A MIXED BLESSING FOR THE GOI. THE OPPOSITION'S TACTICAL DECISION TO TARGET GOI POLICY AS PART OF ITS LONG-RUNNING GUERRILLA WARFARE CAMPAIGN AGAINST BERLUSCONI

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 ROME 00699 02 OF 04 202220Z
WILL PREVENT ANY SIGNIFICANT BI-PARTISAN COOPERATION, WHICH THROUGHOUT THE POST-COLD WAR ERA HAS BEEN THE NORM ON MAJOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES. THE GOI HAS MADE AN EFFORT TO "NATIONALIZE" ITS IRAQ POLICY, CALLING ON THE CENTER-LEFT TO UNITE BEHIND A POLICY OF DIPLOMACY BACKED BY THE THREAT OF FORCE. HOWEVER, WITH PUBLIC SENTIMENT RUNNING SO STRONGLY AGAINST CONFLICT, AND THE OPPOSITION DESPERATELY SEARCHING FOR ISSUES AROUND WHICH IT CAN RALLY VOTERS, THE CENTER-LEFT WILL WORK TO KEEP THE DEBATE DIVISIVELY PARTISAN. WHILE THIS

COMPLICATES THE GOI'S MANAGEMENT OF THE ISSUE IN PARLIAMENT,
THERE IS AN UPSIDE.

18. SPLIT AMONG THREE CAMPS--A PACIFIST LEFT, A CENTER-LEFT
OPPOSED TO PREVENTIVE WAR BUT SENSITIVE TO THE UN, AND AN
ELITE CONCERNED ABOUT RELATIONS WITH THE U.S AND ITALIAN
PRESTIGE--THE OPPOSITION IS NOT WELL POSITIONED TO INFLICT
SERIOUS POLITICAL DAMAGE ON THE GOI. INDEED, THE CENTER-LEFT
WOULD SPLINTER BADLY IF A FOLLOW-ON RESOLUTION TO UNSC 1441
AUTHORIZING MILITARY FORCE WERE PASSED BY THE SECURITY
COUNCIL. MANY IN THE OPPOSITION'S RANK AND FILE ARE PINNING
THEIR HOPES ON FRANCE TO FORESTALL THIS.

19. (C) THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC IS NOT STRONG IN ITALY; THE OFFICE HOLDER'S
INFLUENCE STEMS FROM HIS MORAL STANDING AND PERSUASIVE
ABILITIES. PRESIDENT CIAMPI, WHO ENJOYS BROAD RESPECT, ACTS
AS A BUFFER BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION AND IS
FOCUSED INTER ALIA ON ENSURING THAT INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES
DO NOT BREAK DOWN. BUT HE CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SHAPING
POLITICAL OPINION -- INCLUDING ON THE IRAQ DEBATE -- IF NOT
SO MUCH POLICY OUTCOMES (SEPTEL).

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 ROME 00699 02 OF 04 202220Z

110. (C) CIAMPI IS A COMMITTED INTERNATIONALIST WHO BELIEVES
AS STRONGLY IN THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC
RELATIONSHIP AS HE DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION. HE WOULD MAKE
HIS VIEWS KNOWN (AND HAS DONE SO) WERE THE BERLUSCONI
GOVERNMENT IGNORING ONE OR THE OTHER IN POLICY FORMULATION.
NOW, THEIR MUTUALLY COINCIDING GOALS--DEMONSTRATING ITALY'S
FAITHFULNESS TO AN ALLY AND KEEPING THE EU'S INTERNAL CRISIS
WITHIN MANAGEABLE BOUNDS--WORKS TO THE BENEFIT OF THE GOI.
INDEED, A LETTER FROM CIAMPI DELIVERED TO BERLUSCONI ON
FEBRUARY 14 IN WHICH HE STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE TO ITALY OF
THE EU, THE TRANSATLANTIC LINK, AND INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE UN, ALSO COMPLIMENTED THE
GOVERNMENT FOR ITS HANDLING OF THE IRAQ ISSUE. IF THE GOI
CANNOT FIND COVER UNDER BI-PARTISANSHIP, IT HAS FOUND SOME
COMFORT IN THE INSTITUTIONAL ARMS OF THE PRESIDENT.

MANAGING THE DEBATE

111. (C) BERLUSCONI AND HIS CLOSEST POLITICAL
ALLIES--ESPECIALLY DEPUTY PM FINI, HOUSE OF DEPUTIES
PRESIDENT CASINI, FM FRATTINI, AND DEFMIN MARTINO--HAVE SO
FAR MANAGED TO KEEP THE WHITE HOT IRAQ ISSUE ON THE RAILS.

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CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL PTQ2489

PAGE 01 ROME 00699 03 OF 04 202358Z
ACTION EUR-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AF-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DOEE-00	WHA-00
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	VCE-00	AC-01	NEA-00	NRRC-00	NSAE-00	OES-00	OIC-02
	OMB-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00
	IRM-00	SSO-00	SS-00	TRSE-00	T-00	USIE-00	SA-00
	SSD-00	PMB-00	DRL-01	G-00	SSR-00	SAS-00	/005W

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P 201733Z FEB 03
FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8355
INFO NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY
AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY
AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY
USCINCENT MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 03 OF 04 ROME 000699

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2013
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [IT](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITALIAN](#) [POLITICS](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#)
SUBJECT: ITALY: BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT RIDING TOUGH DOMESTIC
WAVE ON IRAQ

WITHIN THE COALITION, DISSENTERS FROM THE PM'S
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 ROME 00699 03 OF 04 202358Z
LINE--INCLUDING A GROUP OF LIBERAL LEGISLATORS PERPLEXED
ABOUT PREEMPTIVE WAR--HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO SPEAK OUT WITHOUT
BEING SHOUTED DOWN. BERLUSCONI HAS ALSO MET PERSONALLY WITH
LEGISLATORS NOT COMPLETELY COMFORTABLE WITH THE GOI'S
POSITION. SHUTTING OFF INTERNAL DEBATE WOULD HAVE BEEN

IMPOSSIBLE; BY FRAMING ITALY'S IRAQ POLICY AROUND A VIRTUOUS GOAL--COMING TO THE AIDE OF AN ALLY IN NEED--BERLUSCONI HAS EFFECTIVELY DEFUSED THE RISK OF A FIFTH COLUMN DEVELOPING.

12. (C) FINI, FOR HIS PART, HAS PLAYED A BEHIND-THE-SCENES ROLE, HELPING TO CONTAIN ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT IN THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE. CASINI HAS BEEN MORE OUTSPOKEN. WHILE HIS PARTY, THE UDC, IS THE SMALLEST COALITION PARTNER, ON IRAQ ITS SKEPTICISM TOWARD WAR IS BROADLY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE CENTER-RIGHT'S CATHOLIC ELECTORATE. CASINI IS ACUTELY SENSITIVE TO THESE FORMER CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC VOTERS--AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES IN PARLIAMENT--AND HAS ADROITLY MIXED A PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO PEACE WITH POLITICAL REALISM IN FRAMING THE ISSUE PUBLICLY. FRATTINI'S STRAIGHTFORWARD NON-POLEMICAL APPROACH IN DEFENSE OF THE UN'S CRITICAL BUT NOT EXCLUSIVE ROLE IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT HAS HELPED KEEP THE GOVERNMENT LINE CONSISTENT AND RELATIVELY CLEAR.

13. (C) MARTINO'S JOB IS TO HELP MANAGE THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN THE LEGISLATURE. BY AND LARGE, HE HAS WIDESPREAD CREDIBILITY BECAUSE HE IS CONSIDERED HONEST, SERIOUS, AND GENERALLY REFUSES TO BE DRAGGED IN TO THE DAILY "TEATRINO" OF POLITICAL SHADOW DANCING. THE GOI'S DECISION TO CONSULT WITH PARLIAMENT ON DETAILED FLOW OF FORCES ISSUES CERTAINLY WAS TAKEN WITH AN EYE TO CONTAINING OPPOSITION RANCOR, BUT IT HAS ALSO PROBABLY HELPED KEEP THE COALITION IN LINE. INDEED,
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 ROME 00699 03 OF 04 202358Z
MARTINO, WHO WE ARE TEMPTED TO CALL A RELUCTANT HAWK, MUST, IN DEALING WITH PARLIAMENT, MANAGE A FLOCK OF DOVES WHO ARE CULTURALLY ALLERGIC TO SEEING ITALY ENGAGED DIRECTLY IN MILITARY CONFLICT.

14. (C) THE DEFMIN, WHO SOWED HIS POLITICAL OATS IN THE NOW DEFUNCT ITALIAN LIBERAL PARTY, OWES HIS ALLEGIANCE TO BERLUSCONI, NOT TO ANY PARTICULAR POLITICAL GROUPING. HE SERVES AS A LIGHTENING ROD FOR THE PM, AND MARTINO'S CAUTION REFLECTS, WE THINK, MOSTLY A RECOGNITION THAT THE GOI IS FAR OUT IN FRONT OF PUBLIC OPINION. MARTINO HAS AT TIMES SAID MORE IN PUBLIC THAN WE THOUGHT NECESSARY. HOWEVER, AS HIGHLIGHTED IN REF B, IN GETTING OUT IN FRONT ON CONTROVERSIAL SECURITY ISSUES SUCH AS IRAQ, HE MORE OFTEN THAN NOT SETS THE TERMS OF DEBATE, AND USUALLY IS ABLE TO STEER IT IN A DIRECTION FAVORABLE TO OUR INTERESTS.

15. (C) DENYING THE CENTER-LEFT AN OPPORTUNITY TO USE EUROPE AS A WEDGE ISSUE ALSO HAS BEEN FUNDAMENTAL TO THE GOI'S OVERALL STRATEGY. WITH 56 PERCENT OF ITALIANS SAYING THEY JUDGE POSITIVELY THE ROLE OF FRANCE AND GERMANY ON IRAQ VERSUS 41 PERCENT SAYING THE SAME ABOUT THEIR OWN COUNTRY'S ROLE, EFFORTS TO BRIDGE THE INTRA-EU GAP HAVE A DUAL FOREIGN POLICY (PAVING THE WAY FOR A SUCCESSFUL ITALIAN EU PRESIDENCY) AND DOMESTIC POLITICAL OBJECTIVE. EVEN A PAPER EXERCISE SUCH AS THE RECENTLY CONCLUDED EU SUMMIT SHOULD HELP BERLUSCONI AMELIORATE HIS "EUROPE" PROBLEM AND REDOUND POSITIVELY WITH PUBLIC OPINION. AT THE SAME TIME, BERLUSCONI MUST BE ATTUNED TO LATENT AND NOT-SO-LATENT ANTI-AMERICANISM CREEPING AROUND THE EDGES OF ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT IN ITALY. THE MORE EU COVER HE CAN SECURE FOR HIS VERY PRO-US POLICY
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 ROME 00699 03 OF 04 202358Z
POSITIONS, THE BETTER THE GOI WILL BE ABLE TO COUNTER THIS PHENOMENON. COMPLETING A "TRIFECTA" BY HELPING TO MEND THE RIFT BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE U.S., WITHIN THE EU, AND BETWEEN THE GOI AND THE ITALIAN PUBLIC, IS ONE OF BERLUSCONI'S KEY POLICY OBJECTIVES.

HOLDING IT TOGETHER

16. (C) THE ONE MILLION (UNOFFICIAL ESTIMATES) PEACE DEMONSTRATORS WHO MARCHED IN ROME ON FEBRUARY 15 WILL NOT CHANGE THE GOI'S DECISION-MAKING PARADIGM. BERLUSCONI HAS SAID PUBLICLY THAT HE BELIEVES THEY UNDERMINED THE CAUSE OF PEACE BY GIVING SADDAM FALSE HOPE THAT FULL COOPERATION WITH THE UN INSPECTORS MAY NOT BE NECESSARY. HE KNOWS THAT, WHILE CERTAINLY SOME CENTER-RIGHT VOTERS PARTICIPATED, GENERALLY ITALY'S CONSERVATIVE CLASSES DO NOT TAKE TO THE STREETS. WHILE LOCAL ELECTIONS ARE SCHEDULED IN MAY, VOTERS DO NOT HAVE A HISTORY OF USING THEM AS REFERENDA TO REGISTER DISSATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE ON NATIONAL ISSUES. THE GOI IS HOPING THAT BY THE TIME ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ROLL AROUND NEXT YEAR, IT CAN TOUT THAT ITALY ON IRAQ WAS ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL PTQ2490

PAGE 01 ROME 00699 04 OF 04 202359Z
ACTION EUR-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AF-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DOEE-00	WHA-00
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VCE-00	AC-01	NEA-00	NRRC-00	NSAE-00	OES-00	OIC-02
OMB-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00
IRM-00	SSO-00	SS-00	TRSE-00	T-00	USIE-00	SA-00
SSD-00	PMB-00	DRL-01	G-00	SSR-00	SAS-00	/005W

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P 201733Z FEB 03
 FM AMEMBASSY ROME
 TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8356
 INFO NTO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
 AMCONSUL FLORECE PRIORITY
 AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY
 AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY
 USCINCCENT MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
 SEDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
 JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
 NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 04 OF 04 ROME 000699

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2013
 TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [PGOV](#) [IT](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITPREL](#) [ITALIAN](#) [POLITICS](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#)
 SUBJECT: ITALY: BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT RIDING TOUGH DOMESTIC
 WAVE ON IRAQ

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 ROME 00699 04 OF 04 202359Z

17. (C) NEVERTHELESS, THE DEMONSTRATIONS DID HIGHLIGHT THE VERY SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC RELATIONS DILEMMA THE GOI MUST STILL TRY TO RESOLVE. ON THE ONE HAND, BERLUSCONI, IN HIS PRESS STATEMENTS, WILL CONTINUE TO STRESS THAT HIS GOVERNMENT IS PURSUING ALL OPTIONS TOWARD A PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS. FOR EXAMPLE, FOLLOWING HIS FEBRUARY 18 MEETING WITH KOFI ANNAN, HE SAID, "NO ONE IS THINKING ABOUT GIVING UP EFFORTS TO BRING ABOUT A PEACEFUL SOLUTION." YET, IN MORE FORMAL SETTINGS, SUCH AS HIS FEBRUARY 19 STATEMENT BEFORE PARLIAMENT, THE PM IS ADOPTING A MORE COLDLY RATIONAL APPROACH. ITALY, HE SAID, IS WORKING FOR PEACE BUT IRAQ MUST BE DISARMED; SADDAM ALONE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS FATE; AND NON-COOPERATION WILL LEAD TO SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES. WE MUST SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF PEACE, BUT NOT OF SURRENDER, BERLUSCONI AFFIRMED.

18. (C) WE THINK IT UNLIKELY THAT THE BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT WILL BE ABLE TO SHIFT PUBLIC OPINION DRAMATICALLY ON IRAQ. IN LEADING FROM THE FRONT, THE GOI HAS PLACED THE U.S.-ITALY RELATIONSHIP AND ITS PERCEPTION OF ITALY'S NATIONAL INTEREST AT THE FORE -- WITH THE ADVANTAGE OF A SECURE PARLIAMENTARY AND ELECTORAL BASE, WHICH, IT PROBABLY CALCULATES (WE THINK CORRECTLY) WILL CAST FUTURE VOTES ON THE BASIS OF MORE PAROCHIAL ISSUES. UNTIL THE UN INSPECTORS REPORT AGAIN ON MARCH 1, ITALY WILL CONTINUE TO CONDUCT A RHETORICAL BALANCING ACT, BUT RECOGNIZES THAT THE WAITING GAME MAY BE NEARLY OVER. OUR ACE IN THE HOLE IS THAT BERLUSCONI WILL FOLLOW OUR LEAD ON HOW LONG IS LONG ENOUGH. IN THE EVENT OF MILITARY ACTION, BERLUSCONI WILL ALIGN A DIVIDED COUNTRY WITH

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 ROME 00699 04 OF 04 202359Z
 THE U.S.-LED INTERNATIONAL COALITION. UN AUTHORIZATION WOULD, HOWEVER, HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON PUBLIC -- AND POLITICAL -- OPINION. IT WOULD ALSO HELP BUFFER THE GOI AND ENHANCE ITS ABILITY TO MANAGE WHAT COULD BE EXTREME DOMESTIC TURBULENCE IF A CONFLICT WERE TO BE PROLONGED AND RESULT IN UNEXPECTEDLY LARGE NUMBERS OF CIVILIAN CASUALTIES.
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